

# N. Topsail residents still kept off island

By TRICIA VANCE

Staff Writer

Normalcy slowly returned to most of Southeastern North Carolina on Sunday as utility crews worked to restore power, water and phone service to customers eager to forget Hurricane Bertha.

On Topsail Island, residents in Surf City and Topsail Beach got their first glimpse of the damage the storm wreaked as it whipped through the area Friday. Town officials allowed residents, property owners and business owners to enter, but the area was still closed to visitors.

But North Topsail Beach, which sustained more damage than its island neighbors, remained off limits Sunday. And residents who can't get to their homes got angry.

"This is the United States of America," an angry man shouted at Mayor Marty Bostic, his finger moving closer to the mayor's face. "I'll stay the next time."

Mr. Bostic allowed media members to tour the island early Sunday so they could see the damage firsthand. He held a scrap of roof in his hand and pointed to downed power lines and craters in the road to illustrate why opening the island would be dangerous.

But as residents grew more testy in mid-afternoon, Onslow County Sheriff Ed Brown arranged for school buses to take residents over the bridge for a tour. One vehicle in front of a bus got stuck in mud during one tour.

Residents were given about an hour to get out and view their homes. By 5 p.m., about 500 people had taken the school bus tour.

Officials don't know when the island will reopen for good or when power will be restored.

"It's a very dangerous place," Mr. Bostic said. "The whole place is still filled full of hazards."

Neighboring Surf City opened at 1 p.m., and town employees began at removing a four-foot sand dune Bertha dumped on N.C. 210. Other crews were working to restore electrical, water and sewer service to much of the island, and most service could be restored by today, Surf City officials said.

At Topsail Beach, a generator allowed officials to restore water service to most residents.

By 6 p.m., Carolina Power & Light crews had restored electricity to all but about 6,700 customers

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## IN BERTHA'S WAKE / 'It smells so bad in here. Even my clothes smell mildewed.'

### Storm update

#### WHAT'S CLOSED

■ North Topsail Beach is still closed and there is no word yet on when it might open to residents.

■ Year-round students in New Hanover County will not start school today as scheduled. The first day of school has been postponed until at least Tuesday. Other summer programs for students — including summer school, driver education and summer preschool — also are canceled today. Staff will report on usual.

#### WHAT'S OPEN

■ Topsail Beach and Surf City are open to residents, property owners and business owners. You must show proof of ownership or residency. On Sunday, officials were requiring anyone living north of the Surf Condominiums to be escorted by officials because of large amounts of sand on the road.

■ Wrightsville Beach, Carolina Beach and Kure Beach are open to residents and non-residents. The ban on alcohol and firearms sales in Carolina Beach also has been lifted.

■ The Brunswick County beaches are open, complete with regular garbage pickup.

■ Normal ferry service to Bald Head Island will resume today, and the island will be open to residents and non-residents.

■ The University of North Carolina at Wilmington will reopen today.

■ Cape Fear Community College was expected to be open.

#### CLEANUP

■ City of Wilmington regulations for trash pickup require that limbs be limited to six feet long and four inches in diameter, but those rules will be relaxed slightly. Crews will be able to remove the debris much faster if residents chop limbs in manageable pieces and stack them neatly beside the curb. Other debris should be bagged.

It could be several weeks or months before the city gets to all neighborhoods.

New Hanover County plans to seek bids from private haulers to pick up the debris. Residents won't be charged.

Yard debris that's mixed with other trash won't be picked up, county officials said. The debris should be placed on the curb or road right of way. Contracting crews are prohibited from going on private property.

Whole trees will not be removed. Pine cones, leaves and twigs can be collected more quickly if put in rigid containers or bagged, but don't tie a knot in the bag or use twist ties to close it. The containers will be dumped and returned.

If you don't want to wait for the crews, you can take the debris to Wilmington Materials Co. at U.S. 421 or to the Blue City Road Recycling Facility, one mile west of N.C. 132.

Yard debris won't be accepted at the county landfill. Other trash will be accepted there from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. today and during regular hours: 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays.

Brunswick County is asking people to take yard debris to the county landfill on U.S. 17.

Brunswick County has discussed roadside debris pickup, but as of Saturday officials had no plans to do it. Some Brunswick towns are already providing the service.

#### BURNING BAN

■ A ban on burning is in effect in New Hanover County. This includes Wilmington, the beach towns and the unincorporated areas of New Hanover County.

#### SERVICES

■ Phones: BellSouth has set up five public phone banks for customers who lost service. They are at the Food Lion at Ogden, the Landfall Shopping Center, near the Wal-Mart at Morley Junction, the park across from Kure Beach Town Hall, and at 207 Canal Drive, Carolina Beach.

■ Food: In Pender County, the Red Cross is offering breakfast from 7 to 9 a.m., lunch from 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. and dinner from 5 to 8 p.m. at these places: Topsail Police Department, Topsail High School, Seem's Hill Marina, Wilson's grocery store in Burgaw and West Pender Middle School.

— From staff reports



Raeford Brinkley looks at a clock that stopped about 12:50 p.m. Friday when the Kure Beach house he lives in was destroyed. He was not in the house.

## Bertha

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in the Wilmington area, CP&L spokesman Kyle Hampton said. At the height of the storm Friday, about 84,000 homes and businesses lost electricity.

He said the company expected to have electricity restored to all but about 5 percent of customers by Sunday night. The remainder should have power today.

Brunswick Electric Membership Corp. expected to have power to almost all customers by 10 p.m. Sunday. A few customers in scattered areas might still be without electricity today, said Member Services Representative Philip Morgan.

All but about 300 customers had power by 6 p.m. Sunday, he said.

Four County Electric Membership Corp. was trying to restore power to about 2,000 customers, half in the Burgaw area and half around Rose Hill. In Onslow County, about 700 CP&L customers and 7,500 with Jones-Onslow Electric Membership Corp. were without power.

Late Sunday afternoon, about 600 Wilmington customers were without phone service. BellSouth officials said.

### Water and sewer

Also Sunday, Wilmington and New Hanover County officials dealt with several sewage spills caused when power failed at pump stations.

"We are trying to get generators out to some of the locations," said County Engineer Wyatt Blanchard.

Sewage spills occurred in the Laurel Ridge, Fox Run Farms and Windward Oaks subdivisions, in areas off Greenville Loop Road and at the New Hanover County airport. The system that monitors pump stations was lost when the top of a communications tower at Sea Breeze blew off.

A main sewage line at Wilmington's treatment plant on North 23rd Street also ruptured, spilling its contents into Smith Creek. "Right now I couldn't tell you for sure what amount went into the waterways," Mr. Blanchard said. The county's Health Department and state environmental officials have been notified and are investigating, he said.

Water and sewer problems in Carolina Beach that helped prompt town officials to

delay allowing residents back on the island were apparently fixed by Sunday, said a spokesman at the town's Police Department.

Water service was restored to most areas in New Hanover County, but environmental health officials caution anyone who lost water or water pressure to boil water before drinking it until further notice. Water will be tested, and officials will notify residents through the media when they can stop taking precautions, Mr. Blanchard said.

People with wells should contact the Health Department for advice if their wells were flooded during the storm, Mr. Blanchard said.

The storm also halted the first day of school for year-round students in New Hanover County schools and canceled other classes set for today because of damage and debris. Classes could resume Tuesday.

Myrtle Grove Middle School sustained significant damage to its roof, said school system spokesman Dianne Avery. Broken windows and leaking roofs were the most serious problems, she said. The school's damage was estimated at less than \$170,000.

### Damage estimates

Officials continued to refine other estimates of damage as the first insurance claims were filed.

USAA Insurance, which handles 45,000 policies on the state's coast, had about 1,650 claims filed by Sunday evening.

The company's spokesman, Richard Erickson, said the vast majority of claims were not flood-related. Most people did not report major damage, he said.

"We anticipated about four times as many claims," he said. "It's not as bad as we thought."

By Sunday evening, the American Red Cross had issued preliminary damage assessment reports showing that 5,747 North Carolina homes were affected by the hurricane. Of those 176 homes were destroyed and another 906 were uninhabitable, said spokesman Elizabeth Quirk.

Brunswick County beaches, which were spared more than other area beaches, sustained about \$2 million worth of damage, said the county's Emergency Management Director Cecil Logan. The hardest hit areas there were Bald Head Island and Ocean Isle Beach, each suffering about \$450,000 in damage.

New Hanover County, Wilmington and Wrightsville Beach officials had no updated

damage estimates. On Saturday, those estimates were more than \$16 million worth of damage in those areas, including \$2 million at New Hanover Regional Medical Center.

Eric Peterson, Topsail Beach town manager, said property damage was about \$2 million.

Property damage was estimated at more than \$40 million for Onslow County, not including Jacksonville totals expected today.

Damage estimates for Carolina and Kure Beaches were not available. Surf City in Pender County expect damage estimates today.

But the big news on damage continued to be crops. Brunswick County estimates about a \$9 million loss, and estimates reached \$20 million in Onslow County.

A team of agriculture officials will begin to assess all crop damage today, said Aaron Martin, a crop insurance specialist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Farmers should report damage to the Farm Service Agency in their county.

### Erosion

Officials did get a better idea of the erosion problems caused by the storm.

Large chunks of sand slid into Mason's Inlet at the north end of Wrightsville Beach as churning waves inched closer to Shell Island Resort. The inlet's swift movement southward brought the \$22 million resort even closer to slipping into the sea.

About 50 feet of dunes were swept away by the inlet, said Wrightsville Beach Mayor Herb McKim.

"It knocked the sand right off of the top," he said.

A small band of the dune is all that's left between the inlet and a patch of asphalt at the resort. But the inlet channel doesn't seem to have moved much closer to the resort, said Spencer Rogers with the N.C. State University Civil Engineering Department.

The dune's height doesn't matter much in chronically eroding places like Shell Island, he said. Much of the damage he saw during an initial beach inspection was caused by water flooding the area and seemed superficial, he said.

The disintegration of about three-fourths of Kure Beach's dunes illustrates how badly the town needs a beach renourishment project that until recently looked dead because state lawmakers didn't include money for it, said Mayor Betty Medlin.

"It makes it even more urgent now because now we have buildings even closer to the ocean, and they don't have any protection at all," Ms. Medlin said.

During a fly-over tour of Southeastern North Carolina, University of North Carolina at Wilmington professor Bill Cleary pinpointed the worst erosion at the north end of Topsail Beach. The earth science professor said it looked like the eye crossed land there, causing major breaches in the island's dune system.

Surf City also had major dune damage, losing about a mile of dunes, according to officials there.

Even so, beach erosion was lighter than many had predicted.

"I expected a lot worse," Mr. Cleary said. "Topsail was in bad shape to begin with. It was a disaster waiting to happen."

Part of the reason damage was minimal may have been a smaller-than-expected storm surge. Mr. Cleary said he thought the surge did not get over six feet.

### Relief help

Many of those stranded by the storm continued to get help from relief organizations Sunday.

The American Red Cross said Sunday that it had sheltered more than 8,500 people, and the Red Cross said 550 employees and volunteers had helped open 55 shelters and serve 22,730 meals.

So much help for storm victims poured in that some emergency officials are asking relief workers to stop coming.

Pender County officials said they've got their problems under control and don't need any more relief workers. The beach communities appreciate the help, said county emergency management coordinator Carson Smith, but they're having trouble feeding and sheltering all the workers.

Others apparently tried to take advantage of Bertha's victims.

With power still out in many areas, Wilmington police had two reports of stolen generators, worth a total of \$26,000.

In Pender County, Mr. Smith said he received a report of at least one person posing as a federal relief worker offering to clean up residents' homes for \$400.

Staff writers Chris Davis and Dana Allwein and correspondent Mtsa C. Lee contributed to this report, which includes material from The Associated Press.